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University Relations/Enrollment Management

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## 2014 WVU Focus Group Top of Mind Focus Group Results\_Widmeyer

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## MEMORANDUM

To: Sharon Martin, Michael Esposito  
West Virginia University

From: Christopher Panetta, Matt Price, Stacia Tipton  
Widmeyer Communications, a Finn Partners Company

Re: Focus Group Top of Mind Findings

Date: October 30, 2014

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Between October 22 and October 27 Widmeyer Communications, a Finn Partners Company conducted six focus groups as part of the branding refresh project.

- Two groups were conducted online (1 alumni, 1 parents of college bound students in NE corridor);
- Two were conducted in Charleston, WV (1 prospective students, 1 engaged community/sports enthusiasts); and
- Two were conducted in Columbus, OH (1 prospective students, 1 parents of college bound students).

This memo provides our interim, top-of-mind highlights through the first six groups.

- Parents and prospects enter the college-selection process with a clear sense of what they are looking for and are “shopping” for the best value. In terms of personal fit, across the groups, they described wanting a small, close-knit community where students are supported, “not just a number” and will not get lost in the crowd. In terms of quality, they look at overall reputation but also rankings, recognized programs/majors, financial aid, student-to-faculty ratios, graduation rates, alumni successes and career supports as important college attributes.
- Outside of West Virginia, we found there was very limited knowledge about the state among parents and prospects. This lack of understanding was also the case with WVU, as many participants could not cite specifics about the school or only had loose associations. Mountains, natural beauty, and “friendly” people were often the initial positive impressions they had with the state. West Virginia’s lagging economy and the dominance of the coal industry were cited as negative impressions.

- In West Virginia, students and community leaders/sports fans discussed challenges with the state's economy but took it a step further and described it as hurting the state's ability to attract in-state students to WVU or retain them in the state after they graduate. Additionally, in state community members say that WVU is overlooking West Virginia students especially around Charleston and was too focused on out-of-state recruitment.
- WVU's position as the "West Virginia's flagship university" seems secure, but regional competition may be more intense than suspected. In Charleston, most of the prospects were applying to local schools, such as Marshall University and the University of Charleston. They thought these schools were competitors of WVU, and did not tend to associate WVU with some of the schools that are more nationally grouped with WVU, such as Ohio State, Penn State, or Michigan State. In the virtual groups with Northeastern parents and the Columbus, OH focus groups, families were casting a wide net (as far as Florida, Kentucky and even California) while easily overlooking the options of WV and WVU.
- While many, especially along I-95 corridor, were unsure of what distinguished WVU from other colleges, some were able to point to the football team and its school pride. Notably, several informed respondents mentioned the medical school across the groups. In state, students and community members also mentioned the medical school as well as accessibility and WVU's quality of education as its leading attributes.
- Both in state and out-of-state, the party school image was commonly mentioned or as one parent along the I-95 corridor said, "I know eight kids that either currently attend or have graduated and they make no bones about the party atmosphere on campus." Some respondents believed partying was more intrinsic to large, public universities than WVU itself, but all those in state knew of the recent riots, past couch burnings and took those incidents quite seriously. In fact, the riots came up unprompted in Charleston and participants concluded it was harmful to WVU's image. It was interesting in these groups that not only was the party school image unappealing, students and parents had very real concerns about distractions, drop-out rates, the intellectual atmosphere and party-life interfering with the undergraduate experience.
- Knowledge about the leadership changes at WVU varied with each location and with each audience. Along the I-95 corridor, parents did not hear anything about President Gee and didn't know about him, while knowledge was much higher with parents in Columbus because of his tenure at the Ohio State University. As expected, prospects and community members in Charleston were knowledgeable as were alumni who described hearing from President Gee often. In both Columbus and Charleston, respondents thought

- Gee would be a great fundraiser and would continue to modernize the campus. However, in each location, particularly Columbus, there was hesitation with his selection. In Columbus, the parents were quick to recall the past controversy over racially insensitive comments, and in Charleston Gee's attendance at parties gave some pause.
- The flying WV logo was universally liked across the groups though a few parents along the I-95 corridor were more critical. The participants all agreed it was recognizable and the colors were bright and vibrant.
  - While the flying WV logo was accepted across the groups, the Mountaineer logo was more polarizing. Participants in state and alumni defended the logo as it expressed the state's heritage, tradition and pride, or as one alumnus said, "Love him, and he makes my heart swell with mountaineer pride." However, the Mountaineer drew much harsher criticism along the I-95 corridor and in Columbus. Terms like "outdated" "redneck" and "stereotypical" were often used and some participants could not see past the musket. As one parent said, "Wrong, wrong image. Like we need more guns." Columbus parents, particularly African American parents, said how the logo reinforces the "good ol' boy image" and that turned off their children to WVU.
  - We tested two brand positioning concepts – "Mountaineers Go First" that focused on Mountaineer graduates leading the way and "State of Motion" that focused on progress and the school moving forward. Both concepts garnered similar ratings with participants providing specific feedback on each.
  - Mountaineers Go First  
Respondents appreciated that "Mountaineers Go First" focused more on WVU's academic offerings rather than the opportunities provided by the state of West Virginia (as depicted in "State of Motion.") To paraphrase a mother in Columbus, "My son is going to college to learn, not to whitewater raft." The participants gravitated to the technological visuals and wanted to see more computers, labs and cutting edge research and as it helped them move away from their stereotypes of an old, rural university. The appeal of this was mostly emotional, and while participants liked it initially, it was quickly picked up apart once they were asked to give specifics about their perceptions of it.
  - State of Motion  
Generally, respondents liked the message frame of constantly moving forward as it showed a college looking to go further and its determination. They found this frame seemed more updated and modern. Respondents also recognized that the ad was appealing because it showed what one could do in West Virginia and the campus (many didn't not have an inkling of either) but

they criticized it for the lacking academic images that they liked in “Mountaineers Go First.”

Two more groups will be held in Dallas, TX on November 5 among alumni and parents of college bound students. A full, final report with recommendations backed by respondent quotes and ratings will follow the last set of groups.